

Cyberpragmatic Analysis: A Case Study of Responses to
the 'Police Officer Killed in Promotion Talks' Incident
การวิเคราะห์วาทกรรมในการวิพากษ์ออนไลน์ กรณีศึกษาของผู้ใช้ภาษาชาวไทย
ต่อกรณีการเสียชีวิตของตำรวจ

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Abstract

This study investigates the cyberpragmatics of verbal irony in Thai online discourse, focusing on netizens' reactions to the death of a police officer during promotion discussions. A dataset of 635 comments, collected from the official Facebook page of the talk show Hon Krasae (September–October 2023), captured immediate public responses, ensuring that reactions reflected spontaneous sentiment rather than retrospective rationalisation. Using a mixed-methods design, both quantitative and qualitative analyses were conducted on the original Thai-language comments, with attention to linguistic and cultural nuances. Content analysis identified eight communicative forms: Ironic Criticism (23.31%), Explicit Criticism (17.64%), Interrogative (15.12%), Ironic Compliments (12.91%), Implicit Sarcasm (10.39%), Third-person Sarcasm (9.76%), Direct Suggestion (8.82%), and Slang/Colloquial Usage (2.05%). Verbal irony often functioned as implicit social critique, exemplified by comments such as “Good people will get rewards for their work. It’s a normal thing,” which contrasted surface meaning with the reality of rejecting corruption. The findings suggest that irony and sarcasm serve complementary roles: irony provides implicit critique, while sarcasm conveys more overt evaluation. By highlighting these functions, the study enhances media literacy, equipping readers to recognise and interpret irony in online communication and offering deeper insight into its role in Thai digital discourse.

Keywords: Cyberpragmatic, Ironic Compliment, Ironic Criticism, Thai Online Users, Verbal Irony

บทคัดย่อ

งานวิจัยนี้มุ่งศึกษาแนวทางการใช้วัฒนธรรมเสียดสีในโลกออนไลน์ของผู้ใช้อินเทอร์เน็ตชาวไทย โดยเฉพาะในกรณีวิพากษ์วิจารณ์เหตุการณ์การเสียชีวิตของเจ้าหน้าที่ตำรวจ ผ่านการวิเคราะห์ความคิดเห็นจำนวน 635 ข้อความบนเพจเฟซบุ๊กของรายการ "โหนกระแส" ซึ่งเป็นรายการโทรทัศน์ที่นำเสนอประเด็นร้อนในสังคมไทย งานวิจัยนี้ใช้วิธีการแบบผสม (Mixed-method) รวมการวิเคราะห์เชิงปริมาณและเชิงคุณภาพเพื่อสำรวจลักษณะของวัฒนธรรมเสียดสีในบริบทออนไลน์ ช่วงเวลาที่เก็บข้อมูลครอบคลุมระหว่างต้นเดือนกันยายนถึงเดือนตุลาคม พ.ศ. 2566 ผลการวิเคราะห์พบว่า ผู้ใช้อินเทอร์เน็ตชาวไทยใช้วัฒนธรรมเสียดสีเพื่อตั้งคำถามและวิพากษ์บรรทัดฐานทางสังคม ตัวอย่างหนึ่งที่สะท้อนความหมายแฝงได้ชัดเจน คือ ข้อความที่ว่า "นี่คือรางวัลตอบแทนของคนดี มันเป็นเรื่องปกติ" ซึ่งแฝงการเสียดสีในเชิงลึก ข้อความทั้งหมดในงานวิจัยนี้ได้รับการแปลจากภาษาไทยเป็นภาษาอังกฤษเพื่อการวิเคราะห์ในเชิงเปรียบเทียบ ในการศึกษาครั้งนี้ พบรูปแบบการสื่อสาร 8 ประเภท ได้แก่ การวิพากษ์เชิงเสียดสี คิดเป็นร้อยละ 23.31 การวิพากษ์ตรงไปตรงมา คิดเป็นร้อยละ 17.64 คำถามเชิงประชด คิดเป็นร้อยละ 15.12 การชมเชิงเสียดสี คิดเป็นร้อยละ 12.91 การประชดโดยนัย คิดเป็นร้อยละ 10.39 การวิจารณ์ผ่านบุคคลที่สาม คิดเป็นร้อยละ 9.76 ข้อเสนอแนะตรงไปตรงมา คิดเป็นร้อยละ 8.82% และการใช้สแลงหรือภาษาพูดทั่วไป คิดเป็นร้อยละ 2.05 โดยสรุป งานวิจัยนี้เน้นให้เห็นถึงบทบาทสำคัญของวัฒนธรรมเสียดสีและการประชดในฐานะเครื่องมือสื่อสารที่สะท้อนมุมมองและความคิดทางสังคม ช่วยส่งเสริมการรู้เท่าทันสื่อและเข้าใจการสื่อสารเชิงเสียดสีในโลกออนไลน์ ซึ่งอาจนำไปสู่การลดความเข้าใจผิดและส่งเสริมการสนทนาที่สร้างสรรค์ในสังคม

คำสำคัญ: การชมเชิงประชด, การวิจารณ์เชิงประชด, ผู้ใช้อินเทอร์เน็ตชาวไทย, วัฒนธรรมการวิพากษ์วิจารณ์, วัฒนธรรมในโลกออนไลน์

Introduction

The evolution of mass communication, driven by digital technologies, has shifted from traditional, top-down information dissemination to more interactive and participatory platforms. This transformation allows individuals to actively engage with content, moving beyond the one-way communication models of legacy media (Yus, 2011). Opinion sharing, as a fundamental part of human communication, fosters dialogue and debate in online spaces (Herring, 2013). While free expression is central to democratic societies, its responsible use within legal and ethical boundaries is crucial (Graham & Hardaker, 2017). Social media has expanded opportunities for discourse but also created environments where antagonistic communication thrives. The anonymity and immediacy of online interactions often lead to aggressive expressions, frequently manifested through verbal irony, sarcasm, and other pragmatic strategies aimed at critique or mockery (Dynel, 2014; Yus, 2016). When misapplied, these strategies can exacerbate hostility in digital discourse, raising concerns about civility in online communication (Hardaker, 2010).

Hon Krasae, one of Thailand's most-watched talk shows, is known for covering current events, controversies, and socially relevant issues, often adopting a sensationalist approach that draws widespread attention. It frequently addresses topics related to justice, law enforcement, and societal norms, positioning itself as a significant influencer of public opinion. A recent case involving the alleged killing of a police officer for rejecting corruption sparked extensive societal debate. This incident, which raises critical questions about law, justice, and authority in Thailand, provides a rich context for examining the cyberpragmatic behaviour of Thai netizens. Online discussions often reflect broader societal attitudes toward power and justice (Graham & Hardaker, 2017; Hardaker, 2010), offering valuable data for exploring how individuals use digital platforms to express their views (Yus, 2011).

Hon Krasae's influence extends to digital platforms like Facebook, YouTube, and TikTok, where audiences engage directly, particularly through comment sections that serve as forums for public debate. Research by Archer (2008) and Dynel (2014) suggests that these sections mediate speech, often through verbal irony, sarcasm, and impoliteness, especially when discussing contentious social issues. Studying these platforms reveals the pragmatic strategies people use, such as navigating politeness, irony, and criticism, when discussing sensitive topics (Graham & Hardaker, 2017). This research is crucial for understanding how digital environments shape public discourse and influence opinion formation. This study explored a socially significant episode from Hon Krasae, focusing on public reactions to the death of a police officer allegedly killed for refusing to engage in corruption.

The incident happened in September 2023, a police officer was fatally shot during a dinner meeting in Nakhon Pathom, Thailand (Bangkok Post, 2023; Straits Times, 2023). The event, hosted by a local subdistrict headman (Mr. A), included several highway police officers, among them Officer B and Officer C. During the gathering, Mr. A requested a promotion for a relative, which Officer B declined, citing merit-based procedures. This refusal reportedly led to a dispute, after which Mr. A's associate (Mr. D) opened fire, killing Officer B and seriously injuring Officer

C (Bangkok Post, 2023). Authorities launched a manhunt for Mr. D, who was suspected of acting on Mr. A's orders. Mr. A later surrendered to the police (Bangkok Post, 2023). The case raised concerns about local political influence over law enforcement. Additionally, fourteen officers faced dereliction of duty charges for failing to intervene (Straits Times, 2023).

The case has generated widespread online discussion, making it an ideal context to explore the use of verbal irony in Thai online critiques. The emotionally charged nature of the event allows for an in-depth analysis of how verbal irony functions in digital discourse, particularly in relation to socially charged topics. Focusing on this specific event provides insights into how verbal irony is used in emotionally intense discussions. Such a focus is essential in pragmatic studies, as it reveals how individuals employ irony not only to critique but also to navigate complex social dynamics, such as power relations and ethical dilemmas. In Thai online communication, verbal irony serves as both a tool for dissent and a form of social commentary, revealing how users critique authority and societal issues.

Understanding verbal irony in online communication is crucial, as it reflects broader social commentary and how individuals engage in critique in digital spaces (Gibbs & Colston, 2007; Attardo, 2000). Previous research shows that verbal irony functions not just as a rhetorical device but also as a mechanism for negotiating social relationships and power dynamics (Hancock, 2004; Burgers, Van Mulken, Schellens, 2011)

By examining Thai netizens' use of these strategies, this study offers cultural insights into online communication, contributing to the field of cyberpragmatics. This research also underscores the importance of digital platforms in shaping contemporary public discourse, where irony and other pragmatic strategies address sensitive social issues. Analysing verbal irony in response to this significant event allows researchers to explore the intersection of language, emotion, and social critique in online spaces (Yus, 2011; Hancock, 2004). The rise of digital platforms as spaces for social commentary highlights the need to understand how language functions in virtual environments, particularly when addressing contentious topics. The literature review will explore key concepts such as cyberpragmatics, verbal irony, politeness, criticism, and sarcasm, illustrating their roles in shaping online discourse.

Objective

This study examines the use of verbal irony and related communicative strategies, including criticism, sarcasm, and slang, by Thai online users when conveying critical commentary on digital platforms.

Literature Review

1. Cyberpragmatics

Pragmatics studies the relationships between linguistic expressions and their users, focusing on the intentions, assumptions, beliefs, and goals that shape communication. It also explores how language is used in specific contexts, considering the environments and sociocultural factors

that influence interactions (Celce-Murcia & Olshtain, 2000). Levinson (1983) highlights that pragmatics not only examines how meaning is conveyed but also how it is interpreted, often extending beyond literal expressions through implicature, shared knowledge, and context.

In the digital era, pragmatics has expanded into cyberpragmatics, which focuses on language use in virtual environments. Online communication lacks the physical and social cues of face-to-face interaction, such as tone of voice and body language, making context and inference even more critical (Yus, 2011). In digital spaces, users often form virtual speech communities without personal familiarity, relying on linguistic strategies like irony, sarcasm, and emoticons to convey their communicative intent (Herring, 2013).

Cyberpragmatics also explores how traditional pragmatic theories, such as Grice's cooperative principle and speech act theory, are applied and adapted in online settings (Grice, 1975; Austin, 1962). The absence of immediate social feedback in these environments requires users to develop new methods for managing politeness, humour, and indirectness, key components of pragmatic competence (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Irony and sarcasm are particularly important in expressing critique, dissent, and social commentary online (Dynel, 2014).

In face-to-face communication, context is shared through physical presence and social conventions. However, in online communication, users must rely more on textual and visual clues due to the absence of non-verbal signals like facial expressions and tone. This forces a heavier reliance on inferred context, often depending on shared cultural or situational knowledge (Leech, 2014), which significantly impacts how pragmatic strategies are used in digital environments.

The fragmented nature of digital interactions complicates the sharing of context. As Olshtain and Treger (2023) explain, online communication occurs in dynamic, multi-layered environments shaped by platform design, participant anonymity, and audience expectations. For example, the same text may be interpreted differently depending on the platform (Twitter, Facebook, or private messaging), each with its own affordances that influence how users manage meaning. Cyberpragmatics thus becomes essential for understanding how communication is negotiated in these fragmented spaces.

Recent studies, like Graham and Hardaker's (2017) examination of trolling, illustrate how some users manipulate shared context to provoke emotional responses, highlighting the constantly renegotiated nature of context in online discourse. This dynamic context is a defining feature of communication in digital spaces.

2. Irony and sarcasm in cyberpragmatics

Irony and sarcasm are prevalent in online communication, often used to convey humour, critique, or dissent. However, these rhetorical devices present challenges in digital environments due to the lack of non-verbal cues, such as tone of voice or facial expressions, which traditionally signal ironic intent. In face-to-face interactions, sarcasm is frequently conveyed through tone or body language, offering clear indicators that the speaker means the opposite of what is said (Attardo, 2000). Online, users must rely on alternative markers like punctuation, capitalisation,

or emojis to express ironic intent (Dynel, 2014).

Yus (2016) explores the use of irony in online discourse, noting that while it can foster humour or social bonding, it often leads to misinterpretation in digital environments. This is particularly true in public forums, where participants may not share common knowledge or a familiar social context, making it harder to detect irony. The potential for miscommunication is heightened by the public and often anonymous nature of online platforms, where messages are directed at a broad audience lacking personal familiarity.

Research also highlights the social functions of irony and sarcasm in digital spaces. Dynel (2014) suggests that sarcasm can serve as a face-saving strategy, allowing individuals to critique indirectly or handle delicate situations without direct confrontation. However, in online contexts, sarcasm may become more aggressive, particularly where anonymity encourages behaviour that would be avoided in face-to-face interactions. In such settings, sarcasm and irony not only serve as tools for social critique but can also escalate conflicts, contributing to more hostile discourse.

3. Politeness and impoliteness in cyberpragmatics

Politeness theory, as outlined by Brown and Levinson (1987), is key to understanding cyberpragmatics, particularly how users manage face-threatening acts in online environments. In face-to-face interactions, politeness is conveyed through both verbal and non-verbal cues like tone and gestures. Online, however, users must rely solely on language, using explicit markers such as hedging, qualifiers, or emoticons to mitigate face-threatening acts. The anonymity and disinhibition of digital platforms can undermine traditional politeness strategies. Graham and Hardaker (2017) note that online settings, especially anonymous forums, often encourage impoliteness as users feel less bound by social norms. This "online disinhibition effect" (Suler, 2004) leads to more aggressive and confrontational behaviour, with less concern for maintaining face. In such contexts, impoliteness is frequently used to assert dominance or challenge authority in ways unacceptable in face-to-face interactions. Recent studies have explored how politeness and impoliteness operate in specific online contexts. Terkourafi and Sifianou (2019) examine impoliteness in discourse on social media, showing how users engage in verbal aggression while managing their social identities. Their research highlights that even in hostile environments, users employ complex pragmatic strategies, shifting between politeness and impoliteness depending on context and communicative aims.

4. Speech act of criticism and verbal irony

Nguyen (2005, p. 7) defines criticism as an illocutionary act aimed at delivering a negative evaluation of the recipient's choices, actions, or products, holding them accountable for perceived shortcomings. Nguyen also distinguishes between direct and indirect criticism. Direct criticism involves the explicit expression of negative evaluation, openly highlighting the recipient's (H) mistakes, which often threatens H's positive face by challenging their actions or decisions (Brown & Levinson, 1987). In contrast, indirect criticism is more nuanced, with the critique implied rather than stated outright. While less direct, it can still be impactful and, in some cases, more potent

than direct criticism (Tannen, 1994). Linguistically, criticism can take various forms, including declaratives, imperatives, and interrogatives. Declaratives are the most common, offering a clear and direct assertion of the critic's evaluation (Biber, Johansson, Leech, Conrad, & Finegan, 1999).

Imperative criticisms issue demands or instructions, suggesting corrective actions. Interrogative criticisms, often perceived as more polite, invite reflection rather than overtly challenging the recipient (Sperber & Wilson, 1986). These syntactic forms highlight the flexibility of criticism as a speech act, allowing critics to adapt their approach based on context and interpersonal dynamics (Holmes, 1995; Culpeper, 2011).

Several scholars argue that verbal irony often involves a positive evaluation of a negative action, or vice versa (Bisang, Hock, Winter, & Pishwa, 2009).

Verbal irony, a linguistic phenomenon, is characterised by intentional misdirection, where the speaker conveys a meaning contrasting with the literal interpretation (Sullivan, 2019). Alotaibi (2017) identifies verbal irony as a widely studied linguistic feature across languages, traditionally defined as a figure of speech where the intended meaning opposes the literal one, such as saying "The weather is lovely" during a storm. This highlights irony as a substitution of literal meaning with a figurative one. Grice's (1975) theory suggests that verbal irony violates conversational maxims, particularly the maxim of quality, to imply the opposite of what is stated. However, Alotaibi (2017) notes that traditional theories like Grice's do not capture all instances of irony, especially more complex cases. Wilson and Sperber's (1992) echoic theory views irony as an echoic utterance, where prior statements are repeated critically or mockingly. Clark and Gerrig's (1984) pretence theory posits that speakers "pretend" to be uninformed to express irony. While these theories offer valuable insights, they are limited in fully explaining the range of irony (Wilson, 2013; Filik, Turcan, Ralph-Nearman, & Pitiot, 2019). Kumon-Nakamura, Glucksberg, and Brown (1995) describe irony as pragmatic insincerity, where the intended meaning diverges from the conventional interpretation. Burgers, Van Mulken and Schellens (2011) identified four key features of verbal irony: (1) it is implicit, (2) evaluative, (3) allows ironic and non-ironic readings, and (4) involves opposition. Ironic statements often target specific people or objects. Communicative signals that convey irony fall into three categories: contextual, verbal, and paralinguistic cues. Contextual cues involve inconsistencies between words and situations, such as saying "lovely dog" about an aggressive one. Verbal cues include amplifiers like adverbs and adjectives, while paralinguistic cues involve nonverbal signals like tone and facial expressions (Camp, 2012; Utsumi, 2000). The relationship between verbal irony and sarcasm is frequently debated. While both involve non-literal communication, sarcasm is more caustic and mocking (Clark & Gerrig, 1984). Sarcasm typically conveys scorn, aimed at exposing foolishness or critiquing subjects more aggressively than verbal irony, which can express subtle contradictions (Kreuz & Glucksberg, 1989). The distinction between the two lies in their communicative purposes: irony often provokes thought or humour, whereas sarcasm serves to critique or ridicule (Giora, 1995).

In Thai culture, verbal irony functions as a pragmatic tool reflecting societal norms. Panpothong (1996) shows how verbal irony maintains politeness within hierarchical interactions,

enabling speakers to criticise without direct confrontation, thus preserving face. This aligns with Thai values of social harmony and indirect communication. Further, Panpothong (1998) explores how certain forms of verbal irony in Thai have become conventionalised, functioning like conversational implicatures.

Verbal irony also helps manage interpersonal relationships, particularly in maintaining indirectness in hierarchical contexts (Srinarawat, 2005). Thai irony enables speakers to voice disapproval while adhering to politeness norms (Kongchang, 2017), acting as a face-saving mechanism to navigate power dynamics (Samermit & Samermit, 2020). This indirect approach differs from the more direct English use of irony.

Thai learners of English face challenges with irony, often misinterpreting its subtle cues due to cultural differences in expression (Fongchamnan & Tawilapakul, 2017). Sisuk and Dhanesschaiyakupta (2017) show that Thai learners may struggle to comprehend and use English irony, leading to miscommunication. Defining boundaries between irony, sarcasm, and satire in Thai is complex, with irony often more playful, while sarcasm is biting (Nagavajara, 1998).

Panpothong's (2013) framework divides Thai verbal irony into four mechanisms: opposing meanings, expressions of impossibility, exaggeration, and socially incongruous language. These mechanisms reflect culturally embedded strategies for indirect critique. For instance, opposing meanings convey masked criticism, while irony through impossibility critiques behaviours subtly (Panpothong, 2013). Exaggeration mocks societal expectations non-confrontationally, while socially incongruous language signals disapproval without conflict (Samermit & Samermit, 2020). Panpothong's classification offers insights into how Thai speakers navigate social interactions with irony, reflecting cultural values like politeness and face-saving. This approach contrasts with Western irony, which tends to be more direct (Kumwapee & Jitwiriyant, 2020). Verbal irony in Thai serves as a crucial tool for managing relationships, warranting further exploration in cross-cultural pragmatics (Forman, 2011).

In the context of Thai speakers, Panpothong (2013) studied verbal irony, identifying four main types: 1) pairing words or sentences with opposing meanings, 2) conveying impossibility or unreasonableness, 3) expressing greatly exaggerated ideas, and 4) using words or sentences that are deemed inappropriate. This is to say, Panpothong (2013) classifies verbal irony into four primary categories. The first category involves pairing words or sentences with opposing meanings, where the language used conveys a message directly contrary to its usual interpretation. The second category encompasses expressions that convey ideas or situations considered impossible or highly unreasonable in a literal sense. Expressing greatly exaggerated ideas constitutes the third category, where language is employed to convey notions or situations in a manner significantly beyond reality. Finally, the fourth category includes the use of words or sentences considered inappropriate in a social or contextual context. In this case, expressions deemed socially or contextually inappropriate for the given situation fall under the purview of this particular type of verbal irony. In Panpothong's (2013) examination, verbal irony predominantly involves juxtaposing words or sentences with contrasting meanings. In practical terms, when a

speaker intends to convey verbal irony, they frequently intertwine words or sentences with conflicting meanings, ensuring that the audience apprehends the expression's contradictory nature. An illustration of this phenomenon is evident in the sentence: "You are intelligent! A myna bird is on your back now" (Panpothong, 2013, p. 118). Significantly, many Thai speakers recognize the cultural association of a myna bird on a buffalo's back, where the buffalo is metaphorically linked to stupidity due to its perceived slowness and lack of intelligence. Consequently, the implied message remains consistent when directed at individuals. Therefore, while the first sentence seemingly affirms intelligence, the second sentence, stating "A myna bird is on your back now," creates a paradoxical meaning—essentially implying, "You are intelligent, but you are akin to a buffalo," ultimately ironic in suggesting stupidity. Secondly, verbal irony can be employed by the speaker to convey a sense of impossibility or unreasonableness. Panpothong (2013) suggested a scenario where a mother is addressing her daughter, who has recently acquired highly expensive clothing. The mother might playfully suggest, "You can fly by wearing these expensive clothes" (Panpothong, 2013, p. 118). Consequently, it can be inferred that the mother was using verbal irony, as it is, in reality, impossible for anyone to fly, thereby emphasising the exaggerated nature of the statement. Thirdly, speakers may convey greatly exaggerated ideas when employing verbal irony. As proposed by Panpothong (2013), speakers sometimes use exaggeration for the purpose of complimenting or being polite. However, verbal irony can also be recognised when words or sentences are significantly exaggerated. For instance, in a scenario where a parent, praising their son to the parent of a girl, suggests that the girl's parent should enroll their daughter in extra studies so that she can be as accomplished as their son. Consequently, the girl's parents might respond, "No matter how hard my girl studies, she will not be as good as your child. Your child is a genius; he is only in grade 2 but speaks English like a native." (Panpothong, 2013, p. 119). Here, the exaggerated praise serves as a signal of verbal irony. Fourthly, speakers may use words or sentences that are considered inappropriate. In such instances, the degree of inappropriateness or the choice of words can be identified as an indication that the speaker is employing verbal irony. Panpothong (2013, p.119) provides an example of this occurrence, where an older sister addresses her younger sister, who arrived home late in the early morning, saying, "I have to wait for you from dusk till dawn, where have you been proceeding physically?" The choice of words, implying a need to wait until dawn and the use of the phrase 'proceeding physically' instead of 'going,' suggests a level of exaggeration and disapproval that can be interpreted as verbal irony.

As existing research on the use of verbal irony in Thai digital discourse remain scarce, this research addresses this gap by exploring how Thai online users employ irony as a communicative tool, particularly in high-stakes, emotionally charged discussions. While irony in digital communication has been widely studied in humour, political satire, and informal conversations, fewer studies have analysed its function in public discourse surrounding controversial incidents. By focusing on online reactions to a real-world event, this study extends the understanding of irony as a means of social and political critique in digital spaces.

Additionally, previous research on verbal irony often relies on either qualitative discourse analysis or controlled experimental designs. In contrast, this study employs a mixed-methods approach, integrating both quantitative categorization and qualitative analysis to provide a more comprehensive examination of irony's pragmatic functions in real-world interactions. This methodological contribution ensures a more nuanced understanding of how irony operates across different communicative contexts.

Although this study focuses on a single case, it offers significant insights into the broader use of verbal irony in online discourse. By analysing immediate reactions to a controversial event, it captures real-time, unfiltered public sentiment, providing empirical evidence of irony's role as a coping mechanism, a form of protest, and a tool for expressing dissent. Moreover, as a case rooted in Thai digital discourse, this research contributes to cross-cultural pragmatics by illustrating how irony adapts to sociocultural and linguistic norms. Thai honorifics, indirectness, and rhetorical strategies may shape irony in ways that differ from Western conventions, enriching the global understanding of irony's pragmatic functions.

Furthermore, this study highlights the broader social role of irony in digital interactions. It demonstrates how irony, sarcasm, and related communicative devices serve distinct functions, such as reinforcing in-group identity, subverting authority, or signalling discontent. These findings have broader implications for understanding the role of irony in online public discourse, particularly in contexts where direct criticism may be discouraged. By addressing these gaps and offering a culturally nuanced analysis, this research contributes to the expanding field of cyberpragmatics and the study of verbal irony in digital communication.

This study investigates Thai netizens' use of verbal irony and related communicative strategies in online critiques, focusing on identifying common forms. This study draws upon and adapts insights from Panpothong's framework, categorising irony into opposing meanings, impossibility, exaggeration, and inappropriate phrasing., the study offers a structured analysis of irony in Thai discourse, aligning with its objectives. The methodology section outlines how this framework guides the systematic collection and analysis of data in Thai online discourse.

Conceptual Framework

This study adopts a structured analytical framework to examine how verbal irony is expressed in online discourse, focusing on 635 Facebook comments posted on the Hon Krasae page between September and October 2023. The selected dataset centres on a widely discussed case in Thailand—the alleged killing of a police officer following his refusal to engage in corruption. Given the emotionally charged nature of public discourse on justice and accountability, irony plays a crucial role in shaping collective responses and critiques of societal issues.

To systematically analyse instances of irony, this study draws upon and adapts insights from Panpothong's (2013) framework, which identifies irony based on key linguistic and pragmatic features, including opposing meanings, exaggeration, and socially incongruous language. While not directly applying Panpothong's categorisation, this study refines and extends its principles

to suit the complexities of digital discourse. A notable example from the dataset—"Good people will get rewards for their work. It's a normal thing."—illustrates how irony emerges from the contrast between surface meaning and the underlying critique of systemic corruption.

Employing a mixed-methods approach, this study integrates quantitative and qualitative analyses to ensure methodological rigour. The quantitative component involves categorising irony types and measuring their prevalence, while the qualitative analysis examines the rhetorical and pragmatic functions of irony in discussions about power and justice. By combining these methods, the study provides a nuanced interpretation of irony's role in digital discourse.

Building upon Panpothong's (2013) insights, this study identifies core features of verbal irony, such as opposing meanings, metaphorical undertones, insincere language, and critical tone, ensuring a consistent analytical approach. However, it also considers additional dimensions relevant to online communication, such as intertextuality, audience engagement, and the dynamics of social media discourse. This adaptation allows for a more comprehensive exploration of irony in digital public discussions.

Ultimately, this framework highlights irony as a mechanism of social critique, particularly in online debates surrounding justice and power. By contextualising irony within Thai digital discourse, this study contributes to broader discussions on how linguistic strategies shape public perception and reinforce or challenge societal norms in contemporary media environments.

Research Methodology

This study investigates the use of verbal irony in online discourse by analysing a dataset of 635 Facebook comments posted on the Hon Krasae page between September and October 2023. The selected dataset revolves around a widely discussed case in Thailand—the alleged killing of a police officer who reportedly refused to engage in corruption. Given the high socio-political significance of this case, the dataset provides a rich and contextually relevant foundation for exploring irony as a means of public critique of justice, authority, and societal norms.

Justification for Data Source Selection

The decision to focus on Facebook, specifically the Hon Krasae page, is based on its role as a major public discussion forum in Thailand. As a well-known talk show that frequently addresses controversial social and political issues, Hon Krasae attracts a broad and diverse audience, making it a valuable site for studying public discourse. The comment sections on its official Facebook page provide an extensive collection of public reactions, allowing for a focused examination of irony in real-time digital interactions.

While this study relies on a single social media platform, it acknowledges that platform-specific discourse norms and audience demographics may introduce certain biases. Facebook remains one of the most widely used platforms in Thailand, where users often engage in in-depth discussions and debates, making it particularly suited for the analysis of verbal irony.

However, the study recognises that irony may manifest differently across platforms, such as Twitter or YouTube, where user engagement and interaction styles vary. Future research could extend this study by incorporating multiple platforms to enhance the comparability and generalisability of findings.

Data Collection Process

The data collection process was conducted systematically to ensure the relevance and reliability of the dataset. First, relevant posts from Hon Krasae's official Facebook page were identified, focusing on those published between September and October 2023 that directly addressed the case and public reactions to it. From these posts, publicly available comments were extracted, yielding a dataset of 635 unique comments. To maintain data integrity, comments were included only if they were original (not automated or duplicated), written in Thai, and contained evaluative language related to the case. Comments that were off-topic, spam, or excessively short (e.g., single-word responses) were excluded from the analysis to ensure a meaningful exploration of irony usage.

Once the dataset was finalised, a structured framework for irony identification and categorisation was applied. While the study is inspired by Panpothong's (2013) framework, it does not strictly adhere to it but instead adapts and extends its principles to the context of Thai digital discourse. The analysis focused on identifying key linguistic and pragmatic features of verbal irony, including opposing meanings, exaggeration, and socially incongruous language. Each comment was carefully reviewed to determine whether it exhibited these elements. For example, the comment "Good people will get rewards for their work. It's a normal thing." exemplifies irony by contrasting the literal meaning with the underlying critique of social reality, particularly in relation to corruption and justice.

Analytical Approach

A mixed-methods approach was employed to ensure a comprehensive and systematic analysis of verbal irony in the dataset. The quantitative component involved categorising irony types and measuring their frequency and distribution using statistical methods. This provided empirical insights into how irony is manifested and utilised within Thai online discourse. The qualitative analysis, in contrast, offered a deeper examination of irony's rhetorical and pragmatic functions, particularly in relation to criticism, sarcasm, and social commentary. By integrating these methods, the study aimed to provide a nuanced interpretation of irony's role in shaping digital public discourse on justice and authority.

The study's analytical framework is structured around four core features of verbal irony, drawn from and adapted from Panpothong's (2013) model. These include (1) opposing meanings, where the literal and intended messages contrast; (2) figurative and metaphorical connotations, which add layers of interpretation to irony; (3) violations of sincerity, where the ironic expression subverts conventional expectations; and (4) expressions of criticism or negative evaluation, which serve as mechanisms of social critique. This structured approach ensured consistency in identifying irony, reinforcing the validity and reliability of the findings.

While this study focuses on a single platform and a specific socio-political event, its findings contribute to a broader understanding of verbal irony in digital discourse. The emotionally charged nature of the selected case provided a unique opportunity to examine irony as a discursive tool for social critique, particularly in discussions of justice, power, and accountability. Despite its focus on Facebook, the study offers insights into broader patterns of Thai online discourse and suggests that irony plays a significant role in shaping public narratives in digital spaces.

Recognising the limitations of platform-specific discourse, this research suggests that future studies could expand the dataset to include multiple social media platforms to allow for cross-platform comparisons. Additionally, further investigations into different socio-political events could provide a more comprehensive perspective on how irony operates in varying cultural and communicative contexts. By demonstrating the role of irony in shaping online public discourse, this study contributes to theoretical discussions on cyberpragmatics and the sociopolitical dimensions of irony in digital communication.

To systematically categorise the Facebook comments analysed in this study, focusing on the linguistic and pragmatic features of evaluative discourse. The comments were grouped into three primary categories: verbal irony, sarcasm, and criticism. Verbal irony was identified in comments where a clear incongruity existed between the literal and intended meanings, often employing exaggeration, figurative language, or socially incongruous phrasing to convey a subtle critique. Sarcasm, while related, was distinguished by a more overtly mocking tone, frequently accompanied by rhetorical emphasis or exaggerated expressions of praise meant to imply the opposite sentiment. In contrast, criticism was categorised separately as it involved direct expressions of disapproval or condemnation, typically devoid of irony or sarcasm. Given the interpretive complexity of online discourse, some comments presented challenges in classification due to overlapping or ambiguous features. These were addressed through contextual analysis, taking into account surrounding comments, discourse cues, and broader topical references. When comments included both ironic and sarcastic elements, the dominant communicative intent was used to guide classification. In rare instances where a comment contained near-equal features of irony, sarcasm, and criticism, it was placed in a “mixed” category and considered separately in the qualitative discussion. To enhance the reliability of the classification process, an interrater coding procedure was implemented. Two independent coders, both familiar with Thai sociolinguistic and digital discourse conventions, reviewed a subset of the data (approximately 20%) to validate the consistency of the analytical criteria. Although no statistical measures were emphasised, coder agreement was assessed qualitatively, and discrepancies were resolved through discussion and consensus. This approach helped ensure interpretive rigour and consistency across the broader dataset, contributing to the credibility of the findings.

Results

In a nutshell, this study demonstrates that Thai cultural norms, especially those prioritising politeness, deference, and indirectness play a crucial role in shaping how irony is used in online discourse. In a socio-political context where direct confrontation with authority is often discouraged, verbal irony becomes a culturally appropriate strategy for expressing dissent. The comments analysed in this study reveal more than individual emotional responses; they reflect collective attitudes of scepticism and disillusionment toward power structures, particularly in relation to perceived corruption and the failure of justice. Irony, sarcasm, and critical commentary are not merely linguistic choices but function as indirect mechanisms of resistance, allowing speakers to challenge authority while maintaining social harmony. These communicative practices reveal how public sentiment is negotiated through culturally embedded forms of expression, contributing valuable insight into cross-cultural pragmatics. Moreover, they underscore how digital spaces are increasingly used to navigate and critique institutional power, suggesting that irony serves both as a reflection of cultural norms and as a discursive tool for engaging with broader socio-political realities in contemporary Thai society.

This study explores the primary forms of verbal irony and related communicative strategies employed by Thai netizens in expressing criticism. Through the analysis of over 635 Facebook comments, eight distinct categories of verbal irony were identified. Applying from Panpothong's (2013) theoretical framework, the study expands the understanding of verbal irony in online discourse by introducing additional nuanced categories: explicit criticism, ironic compliment, ironic criticism, interrogative, direct suggestion, implicit meaning, third-person sarcasm, and slang/colloquial usage. These categories offer insights into the diverse ways verbal irony functions as a communicative strategy in online criticism.

Table 1 presents an overview of the types of verbal irony, sarcasm, and criticism identified in the corpus data. Derived from a comprehensive analysis of the 635 Facebook comments, the table categorises communicative strategies based on Panpothong's (2013) framework and additional findings from this study.

Table 1 Types of verbal irony, sarcasm, and criticism identified in the corpus data

| Types | Communicative devices | Examples from corpus | Sentences Frequency | Percentage |
|-----------------------|-----------------------|---|---------------------|------------|
| 1. Ironic criticism | Verbal Irony | "He's actually blessed because, judging solely by his appearance, you wouldn't think so" | 148 | 23.31 |
| 2. Explicit criticism | Criticism | "You, the buffalo, have taken the life of someone's child, leaving their parents devastated." | 112 | 17.64 |

Table 1 (Continue)

| Types | Communicative devices | Examples from corpus | Sentences Frequency | Percentage |
|----------------------------|-----------------------|---|---------------------|------------|
| 3. Interrogative | Verbal Irony | "How good he must be to skyrocket in promotions." | 96 | 15.12 |
| 4. Ironic compliment | Verbal Irony | "Wow, he possesses incredible power." | 82 | 12.91 |
| 5. Implicit meaning | Sarcasm | "Khun Chang" | 66 | 10.39 |
| 6. Third-person sarcasm | Sarcasm | "The insider states, 'He is very stingy.'" | 62 | 9.76 |
| 7. Direct suggestion | Sarcasm | "You have the opportunity to be born as a human; therefore, strive to do something good." | 56 | 8.82 |
| 8. Slang/ Colloquial usage | Verbal Irony | "Money is the only one that knock everything" | 13 | 2.05 |
| Total | | | 635 | 100 |

As indicated in Table 1, the most frequent form of criticism in the dataset is ironic criticism, with 148 instances, accounting for 23.31% of the total. This is followed by explicit criticism, which comprises 17.64%, and interrogative at 15.12%. These categories represent the most common communicative strategies used by Thai netizens in expressing criticism. A more in-depth analysis of these criticism types and their implications within online discourse will be discussed in the subsequent discussion section.

Discussion

The paper emphasises the crucial role of pragmatics in understanding the meaning behind human communication, especially within the context of online interactions. As Olshtain and Trege (2023) suggest, the co-construction of context in online communication adds a layer of complexity to the interpretation of pragmatic elements compared to face-to-face interactions. Analysing the data from 'Hon Krasae's official Facebook channel, where discussions were dominated by a controversial incident involving the death of a police officer, highlights how verbal irony, sarcasm, and criticism serve as key communicative strategies in these digital spaces.

This research examined how Thai online users employ verbal irony and related devices in critical online comments, with findings discussed in the following sections.

1. Verbal irony

The findings reveal that ironic criticism (23.31%) is the most frequently used form of criticism, aligning with Panpothong's (2013) framework, where the intended meaning contrasts with the literal statement. For instance, the comment "He's actually blessed because, judging solely by his appearance, you wouldn't think so" subtly delivers criticism through irony, allowing Thai netizens to express disapproval indirectly. This supports Gibbs and Colston's (2007) view that verbal irony involves a sophisticated interpretative process, requiring the listener to understand meaning beyond the literal. The prevalence of this form confirms Srinarawat's (2005) assertion that indirect communication is central to Thai discourse, where avoiding direct confrontation is crucial. Other notable forms of verbal irony include ironic compliments (12.91%), interrogative (15.12%), and slang/colloquial usage (2.5%). Ironic compliments, like "Wow, he possesses incredible power," conceal negative critiques behind seemingly positive language, as noted by Partington (2007) as an effective non-confrontational strategy. Interrogative, seen in comments like "How good he must be to skyrocket in promotions," reflects Clark and Gerrig's (1984) pretence theory, where speakers feign naivety to implicitly convey criticism. Gibbs and Colston (2007) suggest that using informal language and cultural references in criticism deepens communication, making it more relatable and impactful. This is confirmed by the presence of slang and colloquial expressions in the dataset, where irony and humour enhance engagement. Such usage provides a subtle, socially accepted form of criticism that resonates with the audience, maintaining cultural relevance while avoiding direct confrontation.

1.1. Ironic criticism

Ironic criticism, the most common form in the dataset with 148 instances (23.31%), expresses disapproval through statements that appear neutral or positive but carry an opposite, often sarcastic, meaning. This creates layered interpretations, allowing commenters to convey negative sentiments subtly or humorously. Examples include:

- a. "He will survive, surely survive, trust me because money is everything." (รอดอะนะ รอดชีวิตเงินทำอะไรก็ได้)
- b. "Surely, he can be our future prime minister." (แน่นอน ได้เป็นนายกคนที่ 31 แน่)

These statements use sarcasm to critique issues like corruption or incompetence, masking the criticism as praise. The phrase "money is everything" sarcastically highlights a social critique of corruption, suggesting that wealth, not merit, guarantees success. Similarly, referring to someone as a "future prime minister" mocks their unfitness for leadership by presenting it as praise. Kreuz and Glucksberg (1989) argue that such verbal irony relies on the audience's ability to detect the contrast between the literal message and the intended meaning. Ironic criticism, as an indirect form of communication, aligns with Thai cultural norms that favour indirectness and social harmony (Srinarawat, 2005; Prombut, 2020). By using irony, Thai netizens can voice their frustrations while avoiding direct confrontation, a characteristic of communication in collectivist societies.

1.2. Ironic compliment

There were 82 instances (12.91%) of ironic compliments, where statements that seem positive on the surface carry a hidden critical meaning. This contrast between the literal compliment and the actual intent often produces a humorous or sarcastic effect (Kreuz & Glucksberg, 1989). Examples from the dataset include:

- a. "He's the best." (ที่สุดของแจ้)
- b. "He's so damn good." (เก่งชิบหาย)
- c. "His parents raised him so well; we should praise them." (พ่อแม่เลี้ยงมาดีมาก ควรให้รางวัล)

While these statements may initially appear complimentary, their true meanings become clear in context. The first two examples sarcastically imply that the individual is far from being "the best," while the third example, though praising the individual's upbringing, subtly conveys disapproval. This aligns with Gibbs and Colston's (2007) assertion that verbal irony involves saying one thing but meaning the opposite, requiring the listener to understand the speaker's true intent through context. The use of ironic compliments in Thai online discourse reflects the cultural preference for indirect communication and face-saving strategies. According to Brown and Levinson (1987), speakers often use indirectness to mitigate face-threatening acts, especially in collectivist cultures that value social harmony. By delivering criticism through ironic compliments, Thai netizens can express disapproval while maintaining an outwardly polite tone, consistent with societal norms. Furthermore, cultural context adds depth to these ironic compliments. The third statement, for example, about praising the parents, may subtly tap into Thai cultural values regarding family reputation and upbringing. As Haugh (2010) suggests, understanding irony in intercultural communication requires sensitivity to cultural nuances and shared knowledge. The effectiveness of ironic compliments relies on the audience's ability to recognise the incongruity between the literal statement and the intended critique, supported by shared cultural and contextual cues.

This strategic use of verbal irony allows individuals to navigate social interactions delicately. It demonstrates how Thai netizens employ irony to subtly express critical opinions, aligning with cultural expectations of politeness and indirectness. The prevalence of ironic compliments highlights their importance in online discourse as a means of balancing personal expression with maintaining social harmony.

1.3. Interrogative

Interrogative ranks as the fourth most common form of criticism in the dataset, with 96 instances (15.12%). This type of sarcasm employs rhetorical questions to convey mockery or criticism, creating a contrast between the apparent inquiry and the actual critical intent. While the format mimics genuine curiosity, the context and tone reveal an ironic undertone, turning the question into a vehicle for critique. Examples include:

- a. "Who allows him to have 10 guns?" (ใครอนุญาตมากถึง 10 กระบอก)
- b. "Do poor people have the right to have guns, sir?" (คนจนมีสิทธิ์ขอปืนไหมครับท่าน)
- c. "Is he really 34 years old?" (อายุ 34 จริง ๆ ใช่มั้ย)
- d. "He is too young to have 2600 billion baht, how does he get so much money?" (อายุ
ตะอี่มีตั้ง 2600 ล้าน ไปเอามาจากไหนล้าเหลือ)

These questions are not meant to elicit answers but to highlight absurdities or flaws in the subject under discussion. Interrogative, as a form of indirect criticism, allows commenters to express dissatisfaction or mock their target without direct confrontation. This aligns with Colston's (2002) view that verbal irony diverges from literal meaning, requiring the listener to detect the underlying critique. In line with Thai indirect communication strategies (Srinarawat, 2005), interrogative enables netizens to express discontent while maintaining politeness. It reflects the complex dynamics of online communication, where indirect criticism can soften the harshness of commentary while still delivering a clear message. Gibbs and Colston (2007) argue that sarcasm and verbal irony rely on shared social knowledge and context for effective interpretation. In this dataset, sarcastic questions about wealth, guns, or age implicitly critique societal issues, authority, or perceived injustices. In Thai online discourse, interrogative is a powerful tool for addressing sensitive or controversial topics. It allows commenters to voice criticism indirectly, minimising the risks of overt confrontation while delivering a pointed critique. This communication style aligns with cultural norms of respect and politeness, embedding multiple layers of meaning in seemingly simple questions, thus enriching the depth of interaction.

1.4. Slang/colloquial usage

Slang and colloquial language serve as a unique tool in Thai online discourse, allowing commenters to inject irony and humour into their critiques. This often involves cultural references, wordplay, or popular phrases that resonate with the audience. In this study, 13 instances (2.05%) of slang or colloquial usage were observed, demonstrating how these expressions engage readers by balancing light-heartedness with critique. Examples include:

- a. "I'm rocking it" (เรามันก็เท่หะด้วย)
- b. "Thailand only" (ไทยแลนด์โอนด์)
- c. "Cash is the ultimate game-changer, knocking everything else down."
- d. (เงินเท่านั้นที่น็อคเอพรีติง)

The phrase "I'm rocking it" (เรามันก็เท่หะด้วย), popularised by actor Kao Jirayu La-ongmanee, has become a well-known slang phrase in Thai online discourse. Similarly, "Thailand only," coined by comedian Note Udom, humorously critiques behaviours unique to Thai society. These expressions rely on shared cultural understanding among netizens for their ironic meaning to be fully appreciated. "Cash is the ultimate game-changer" references the pervasive influence of money, often used sarcastically to critique how wealth can transform situations, irrespective

of ethics. This reflects Kreuz and Roberts' (1995) argument that slang's effectiveness in conveying irony depends on the audience's familiarity with cultural references. As these phrases are often rooted in popular media, they reflect cultural awareness, allowing Thai netizens to critique social issues in a relatable and entertaining way.

Gibbs and Colston (2007) suggest that informal language and cultural references can deepen communication, making criticism more impactful. The use of slang and colloquial expressions in online discourse underscores the importance of contextual knowledge for fully understanding their ironic meaning, enhancing the relatability and engagement of social critique.

2. Sarcasm

Sarcasm, often more direct and pointed than verbal irony, plays a key role in Thai online discourse. In the dataset, implicit meaning (10.39%) and third-person sarcasm (9.76%) reflect Thai netizens' preference for indirect critique. Similarly, direct suggestions (8.82%) offer advice or recommendations without directly addressing the individual, often targeting authority figures or institutions. This indirect approach aligns with the Thai cultural norm of avoiding direct confrontation. For example, the phrase "Khun Chang," a culturally loaded term, exemplifies sarcasm's reliance on shared cultural knowledge. This aligns with Kreuz and Glucksberg's (1989) assertion that sarcasm is embedded in cultural context, requiring the audience to understand the references. Third-person sarcasm, such as "The insider states, 'He is very stingy,'" allows for indirect critique, adhering to Thai politeness norms and enabling speakers to avoid directly confronting the subject. Wilson and Sperber (1992) also emphasise that sarcasm, while sharper than irony, requires listeners to discern the difference between literal and intended meanings. The dataset's frequent use of implicit criticism and third-person references demonstrates how Thai netizens engage with sensitive topics using culturally appropriate forms of sarcasm. These indirect methods allow criticism to be expressed while maintaining social harmony, addressing important issues without overt confrontation.

2.1. Implicit meaning

Implicit meaning refers to messages that are not directly stated but inferred from context, cultural knowledge, or subtle hints, requiring the audience to "read between the lines." Understanding these nuances is crucial, as implicit meanings often carry hidden implications that deepen the communication. In Thai online discourse, the phrase "Khun Chang" serves as a key example of implicit meaning. "Khun Chang," a character from the Thai epic Khun Chang Khun Phaen, is known for his wealth, unattractive appearance, and undesirable personality (Jermsittiparsert, 2013). Calling someone "Khun Chang" subtly critiques their character while acknowledging their financial status. Examples from the dataset include:

- a. "He is Khun Chang." (ขุนช้างชัด ๆ)
- b. "Khun Chang, hey!" (ไอ้ขุนช้าง เฮ้ย)
- c. "You're so mean, Khun Chang." (ขุนช้างใจร้ายจัง)

These comments use "Khun Chang" as a shorthand for critiquing wealth, appearance, or character without explicitly stating the criticism. This allows Thai netizens to express disapproval indirectly, reflecting the cultural preference for subtlety and indirectness. Gibbs and Colston (2007) argue that irony often relies on shared cultural knowledge for the implicit message to be understood, and "Khun Chang" exemplifies this in Thai discourse. The dataset recorded 66 instances (10.39%) of implicit meaning, demonstrating the frequent use of culturally rooted references to convey criticism without direct confrontation. Kreuz and Roberts (1995) also note that implicit meaning is often employed in sarcasm and irony to critique social behaviours subtly while maintaining politeness.

2.2. Third-person sarcasm

In the dataset, 62 instances (9.76%) were identified as third-person sarcasm, a form of indirect criticism where the commenter refers to a third party or unrelated figure to critique the intended target. This strategy allows disapproval to be expressed while maintaining distance, reducing the risk of direct confrontation. Such detachment can enhance objectivity and introduce ambiguity regarding the speaker's exact stance. For example:

- a. "It has occurred frequently in Thailand; it is not surprising."
(มันเป็นเรื่องธรรมดา เยอะแยะครับในประเทศไทย ไม่เห็นแปลกเลย)
- b. "The marshal must have been thinking, 'I am doomed.'"
(นายอำเภอคิดในใจ เชี่ย ทวีร์จะมาบ้านกูอีกแระ)
- c. "People are not given the opportunity to choose the headman of a village."
(ประชาชนไม่ได้เลือกหรือครับ ผู้ใหญ่บ้านนะ)

These examples show how commenters use third parties, such as "Thailand" or "marshal," to avoid directly addressing the individual being criticised. This technique aligns with Brown and Levinson's (1987) Politeness Theory, which highlights that indirect communication helps mitigate face-threatening acts, particularly in societies that value social harmony. Thai communication often favours this indirectness to maintain politeness and avoid open confrontation.

Wilson and Sperber (1992) further suggest that sarcasm and indirect forms of communication rely on the audience's ability to infer the speaker's true intent. In third-person sarcasm, the listener must interpret the underlying message, as the critique is veiled through references to others. This approach allows for more nuanced criticism while reducing the likelihood of a defensive response from the target.

2.3. Direct suggestions

In the dataset, direct suggestions accounted for 56 instances (8.82%), characterised by clear recommendations aimed at authority figures rather than individuals. This form of indirect communication is common in Thai discourse, reflecting cultural preferences for politeness and avoiding direct confrontation. By targeting institutions or authority figures, commenters maintain social harmony while voicing criticism. Examples include:

a. "The authorities should thoroughly examine his wealth." (อย่าลืมตรวจเช็คเส้นทางการเงินด้วยนะครับเจ้านาย รวยเกิน)

b. "Please reset the system, because this is the source of the problem in Thailand." (รีเซ็ตระบบทั่วประเทศครับ นี่คือนต้นตอปัญหาประเทศเราที่ต้องแก้ไข)

This aligns with recent studies on politeness (Haugh & Kádár, 2017; Grainger & Mills, 2016) as indirect suggestions allow criticism without directly confronting individuals, preserving social harmony. It emphasises the importance of sociocultural context, where indirectness helps navigate power dynamics and critique authority, especially in hierarchical societies like Thailand. The prevalence of ironic undertones in these suggestions reflects a dual-layered communication approach. What appears as a genuine recommendation often carries irony, a strategy Gibbs and Colston (2007) describe as surface meaning diverging from true intent. This allows commenters to engage critically while adhering to cultural norms, contributing to discussions in a socially acceptable manner.

3. Criticism

3.1. Explicit criticism

In the dataset, 112 instances (17.64%) of explicit criticism were identified, characterised by their direct and pointed expression of negative judgments. These comments conveyed clear disapproval, often targeting the village head accused of ordering the killing of a police officer during a promotion discussion. The criticisms ranged from attacks on the village head's appearance to personal insults and even wishes for harm, reflecting strong emotional involvement. Examples include:

- a. "His heart is as dirty as his face." (จิตใจหยาบพอกับหน้าตาเลย)
- b. "Look at his face, it's so disgusting, he should not be the village leader." (ดูหน้าตาอย่างเถื่อน ไม่น่าเป็นใหญ่บ้านหรือกำนันเลย)
- c. "He is so over age; can't believe he is 34 years old." (34 ใช้น้ำตาเปลือกมาก)
- d. "I hope he dies soon." (รีบ ๆ ติดเชื้อในกระแสเลือดนะ)

These comments reveal common patterns of explicit criticism: body shaming, ageist remarks, blame, and malicious wishes. Such direct critique contrasts with the typical indirectness of Thai discourse, where politeness and face-saving are prioritised (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Srinarawat, 2005; Prombut, 2020). Explicit criticism often arises in emotionally charged contexts, where heightened emotions, such as moral outrage or perceived injustice, drive individuals to bypass cultural norms of indirectness (Nguyen, 2005). This is particularly evident in cases involving strong emotional responses, such as the outrage directed at the village head. Online environments, as noted by Haugh and Kádár (2017), tend to facilitate more confrontational communication due to anonymity and the immediacy of responses. Additionally, Grainger and Mills (2016) suggest that online platforms amplify the intensity of criticism by reducing the social consequences

associated with face-to-face interactions. This allows users to express hostile or blunt opinions more freely, particularly when critiquing public or authority figures, as seen in this dataset.

4. Verbal irony and cultural touches

The analysis underscores the importance of understanding cultural context in interpreting verbal irony, sarcasm, and criticism within Thai discourse. Many comments that appear literal at first glance reveal layers of meaning when viewed through a cultural lens. This aligns with Giora's (1995) graded salience hypothesis, which posits that speakers rely on both literal and nonliteral meanings to convey complex messages. The subtlety of these communicative strategies, especially ironic criticism and interrogative, aligns with Thai cultural norms of maintaining politeness and social harmony, as highlighted by Brown and Levinson (1987). Partington (2007) supports this view, noting that verbal irony often serves to critique without direct confrontation, making it an effective tool for handling sensitive subjects. In conclusion, this study illustrates how Thai netizens employ verbal irony, sarcasm, and criticism as key communicative devices in online interactions. The findings reflect not only Panpothong's (2013) framework but also insights from other scholars, such as Gibbs and Colston (2007), Clark and Gerrig (1984), and Wilson and Sperber (1992). The prominence of ironic criticism and the culturally specific use of sarcasm demonstrate the importance of indirect communication in Thai discourse. However, explicit criticism also plays a role in more direct or emotionally charged interactions. This nuanced use of communicative devices highlights the need to consider cultural context and pragmatic elements when analysing online discourse in Thai settings.

Conclusions and Recommendation

This study has examined how Thai netizens employ verbal irony and related communicative strategies in online discourse, particularly in response to a highly publicised case involving institutional authority. The findings are best understood within the sociocultural context of Thai society, where communicative norms are shaped by values of politeness, indirectness, and deference. In such a context, direct confrontation is often discouraged, and irony functions as a culturally acceptable mode of dissent. Rather than overtly challenging authority, users engage in subtle critique through irony, masking disapproval within linguistically polite or seemingly affirmative statements. These discursive patterns reflect broader scepticism toward state institutions, especially in cases perceived to involve injustice, corruption, or abuse of power.

Media outlets, particularly popular programmes like *Hon Krasae*, play a central role in shaping public narratives around such events. Through emotional framing and selective storytelling, these platforms influence public perception and moral judgement. The commentary analysed in this study indicates that Thai audiences are not passive consumers but active participants in meaning-making. Irony, sarcasm, and criticism are used to interrogate the representations presented by the media and to reframe institutional narratives. In this sense, irony is not merely a rhetorical flourish but a form of participatory discourse through which users contest dominant ideologies and assert alternative viewpoints.

At the same time, the excess of emotionally charged public commentary in response to sensitive legal or human rights issues raises important ethical considerations. While the comments in this study offer insight into public sentiment, they do not constitute legal judgement or objective fact. Rather, they represent subjective, culturally inflected expressions of opinion shaped by emotion, media influence, and social experience. Accordingly, irony in this context must be understood as expressive rather than adjudicative used to articulate affective and political positions, not to establish truth claims.

The study insists that verbal irony is a fundamental feature of human communication, enabling individuals to convey stance, navigate power relations, and express alignment or dissent. In Thai digital discourse, irony is both culturally embedded and politically resonant, allowing speakers to negotiate social tension and critique authority while preserving discursive politeness. As such, irony serves not only a pragmatic function but also a socio-political one, revealing the ways in which communicative norms are harnessed for civic engagement. These findings contribute to cross-cultural pragmatics by illustrating how local cultural values inform linguistic strategies in globalised digital environments.

Eight communicative strategies were identified in the data: Direct Suggestion, Explicit Criticism, Implicit Meaning, Interrogative, Ironic Compliment, Ironic Criticism, Slang/Colloquial Usage, and Third-person Sarcasm. These categories reveal the diversity of critical expression in Thai online discourse and the importance of form in shaping pragmatic meaning. Verbal irony, in particular, emerged as a central tool for expressing criticism indirectly, while sarcasm—especially in interrogative forms—was associated with more overt, mocking evaluations. Together, direct and indirect criticisms formed a continuum of evaluative speech, reflecting both individual sentiment and broader socio-political commentary.

The implications of these findings extend beyond academic theory. Understanding how irony operates in online discourse can support media literacy initiatives, equipping individuals to better recognise and interpret indirect speech acts and reducing miscommunication in digital spaces. Educators may draw on these insights to foster greater interpretive awareness in students, while policymakers and social media platforms might consider how communication guidelines or interface features could support respectful, nuanced engagement. For instance, pragmatic cues or educational campaigns could enhance users' understanding of culturally specific discourse practices.

Finally, this study contributes to comparative pragmatics and digital discourse research by providing a culturally situated framework that can inform the analysis of evaluative language across languages and societies. The Thai case demonstrates how irony functions not only as a universal communicative resource but also as a locally meaningful strategy shaped by cultural norms and media ecologies. As digital communication continues to mediate public discourse globally, attending to such contextualised practices is essential for understanding how individuals articulate critique, negotiate power, and participate in civic life through language.

Limitations

This study acknowledges several limitations, particularly its partial examination of critical aspects within online commentary. Future research could address these gaps by conducting a more comprehensive investigation into the cultural dynamics shaping both the expression and interpretation of criticism in online spaces. A deeper exploration of how cultural nuances influence the perception of irony, sarcasm, and implicit meanings within Thai online communities could offer valuable insights into the broader sociolinguistic framework. Additionally, examining the social implications of online criticism—such as its impact on public opinion and its role in shaping discourse—could lead to a more thorough understanding of how virtual communication influences societal norms and behaviours. While this study offers a detailed analysis of verbal irony in response to a socially significant event by focusing on a single episode of a television programme, this narrow focus may limit the generalisability of the findings. Expanding future research to include multiple incidents from various online platforms could help determine whether similar patterns of verbal irony and criticism emerge across different contexts. This broader approach would provide a more robust framework for understanding the complexities of digital communication and the use of irony in diverse settings. Moreover, widening the scope to include a larger dataset would enable comparative analysis across different platforms and demographic groups, contributing to a more nuanced understanding of how irony, sarcasm, and other rhetorical strategies are mediated by different online environments.

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